

**Talking Points Prepared for Delivery
By the Honorable Mike Leavitt
Secretary of Health and Human Services
Choices for Independence Leadership Summit
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It is an absolute pleasure to be here today for this National Leadership Summit.

I commend the Administration on Aging and Assistant Secretary Josefina Carbonell for convening this summit. I have seen first hand Josefina's dedication to older Americans and their families as we traveled around the country on the Medicare bus tour.

I'd also like to recognize Leslie Norwalk, Acting Administrator of Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Leslie is doing a terrific job at CMS. CMS and the Administration on Aging have forged a partnership to help implement an historic change in federal policy – a change that empowers consumers and respects their desire for community living.

All of you are helping to bring about a fundamental transformation in the way we deliver long term care for our country. Over the past several years, I have met many of you – as well as many seniors who depend upon what you do each and every day to help them stay healthy and independent.

Many of you have been involved in our efforts to reach out to enroll more than 38 million older people - 90 percent of all Medicare beneficiaries – in the Medicare drug benefit.

We've had great success because you have been with us every step of the way – including during this open enrollment period and in our ongoing efforts to encourage prevention for people of all ages.

According to a recent report by J.D. Power and Associates, three-quarters of beneficiaries are satisfied with the plan they selected and its coverage. But as so many of you did last year, I'd encourage you to once again sit down with the people close to you who are receiving prescription drugs through Part D. Find out if they're happy with the plan they have. If they aren't, help them find a new one.

Although beneficiaries have until December 31st to change plans or choose one, we strongly encourage them to sign up as soon as possible to avoid inconvenience at the pharmacy counter on January 1.

I'd also encourage you to help them take a look at the new preventive services that Medicare is offering this year. Those new services will help beneficiaries avoid chronic ailments like diabetes and heart disease. It will also help them receive cancer screenings and get their flu shots.

And speaking of flu shots . . . this is the time to get one.

I'd had had mine. I know Josefina had hers when we kicked off National Flu Vaccination Week last week. And I hope others will as well.

The annual flu is a serious disease. Each year in the United States:

- About 36,000 people die and
- More than 200,000 people are hospitalized because of influenza complications

Getting vaccinated is the single best way to protect yourself and those you love against it.

National interest in getting a flu vaccination has traditionally tapered off after Thanksgiving. But flu season doesn't peak until February or later during most years. So the time to get vaccinated is now.

Plenty of vaccine will be available – we have more than we've ever had before. We've also shipped more than ever before. More than 92 million doses have already gone out, so there should be a dose for everyone who desires one.

The message is simple: Please get vaccinated. And encourage your friends and loved ones to do so as well. The only thing you want to catch this holiday season is the holiday spirit, not the flu.

Thank you for your support of this effort. I deeply appreciate all that you do for seniors.

Some of you have heard me say this before – but you represent a “network of caring,” that reflects the compassion of the American people.

For more than 40 years, your network has been an invaluable resource – the visible and trusted resource in the local community – for seniors and their families to help them navigate complex health and long term care systems.

And this past year, President Bush signed two important laws which will help all of us work together to build the future of long-term care.

- The Deficit Reduction Act, and
- The reauthorized Older Americans Act

The Deficit Reduction Act gave states new flexibilities to meet the needs of their seniors covered by Medicaid. The act allows states to redesign their long-term care programs so that:

- The money follows the person instead of simply being sent to an institution and,
- The residents have an option of receiving care at the institution or returning home for home- and community-based care

States can promote private long term care insurance by adopting Long Term Care Partnership Plans. Those plans allow individuals who purchase a qualified long term are

insurance policy to protect a portion of their assets that they would typically have to reduce to qualify for Medicaid.

The Deficit Reduction Act allows for a nationwide expansion of those plans, and asset protection on a dollar-for-dollar basis. So for every dollar of benefits paid under the policy, the individual receives one dollar of asset protection, up to the maximum benefits paid out under the policy.

Long Term Care Partnership Plans are an important new tool, and I hope states will continue to adopt them, even as they are continuing to use the new flexibilities of the Deficit Reduction Act to care for their aging populations.

The reauthorized Older Americans Act also has several timely and extremely important improvements. Its new provisions, which comprise many of the principles of the Administration's Choices for Independence initiative, will do much to ensure that our seniors have the tools to:

- make informed decisions about their health and long term care options
- help them reduce their risk of disease, disability and injury, and
- help moderate and low income individuals who face nursing home placement to remain at home.

It is absolutely critical that we move quickly to give consumers choice and control, as well as encourage and promote the principles of local flexibility and accountability. By being a part of the aging network, each of you is in a unique position to do so.

You play critical roles in state and local long-term care systems. You are on the front lines daily, providing information to older people and their families that will enable them to make better choices and improve their quality of life.

Just as Leslie and I are urging Medicaid Administrators to transform health care, Josefina and I urge you – the aging network – to be an active participant in the transformation of long term care.

By giving people information **now** and helping them make better choices **now**, we are going to help them live better and healthier lives.

This Summit provides a framework to ensure that all of our partners in this historic effort are working together, sharing information, and by doing so, continuing to make a difference in the lives of older and disabled Americans.

Together we can do so. And so I wish you much success, and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the future.

Thank you.